

*Washington, DC* – Yesterday, U.S. Rep. John Hall (D-NY19) brought together leaders from the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) and the Ad Council to discuss strategies for creating public service announcements, supporting websites, and toll free numbers specifically targeted to veterans, families, and survivors in order to educate them on the Federal Benefits available to them and the necessary application processes. As Chairman of the House Veterans' Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Congressman Hall organized the roundtable discussion on Capitol Hill – a follow-up to a May 22nd hearing – to facilitate further dialogue between the VA and the Ad Council, and help augment the VA's current outreach campaigns. There are currently 23 million veterans living in the U.S., of which 2.9 million are receiving VA disability compensation.

“Veterans and potential VA beneficiaries are falling through the cracks simply because they are unaware of the benefits available to them,” said Hall. “There seem to be shortfalls in the VA's ability to create clear, user-friendly messages that reach larger audiences and for the VA to have its own media identity or brand. All too often, veterans learn about benefits from family, friends, other veterans, or blogs that might not match what the veteran needs. Veterans should be able to trust that they have reached the right source whether they click an icon or call a phone number. The Ad Council's proven record, which has promoted the Forest Service's Smokey the Bear and the Agriculture Department's Food Pyramid, can help lay the groundwork for new, innovative thinking in VA outreach.”

Congressman Hall also expressed his support for a mental health awareness campaign that is being initiated by the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America with assistance from the Ad Council.

Since the first VA outreach hearing held on May 22, 2008, the VA policy prohibiting all paid advertising except for personnel recruitment and certain loan guarantee activities was rescinded. The current policy still prohibits the use of appropriated funds for publicity or propaganda purposes not authorized by Congress. The rescission will now allow VA Undersecretaries to purchase advertising in media outlets for the purpose of promoting awareness of VA benefits.

The following attendees participated in the roundtable discussion: Congressman Doug Lamborn, the ranking Subcommittee Minority member; Lisette Mondello, Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, Department of Veterans' Affairs; Keith Pedigo, Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Policy and Program Management, Veterans Benefits Administration; Eric Raun, General Counsel, Department of Veterans Affairs; Dan Bruneau, Director, Communications Management, Veterans Health Administration; Dave Schettler, Director Communications, National Cemetery Administration; Kate Emanuel, Senior Vice President, Nonprofit & Governmental Affairs, The Ad Council; and Vanessa Williamson, Policy Director, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

Congressman Hall introduced and is promoting legislation that will overhaul the VA's disability claims system. The bill would modernize the VA's disability claims process to reflect today's medical conditions and diagnoses, help eliminate the backlog of disability claims, and make it easier for veterans to receive benefits earlier in the review process. Congressman Hall has also recently called for a full and exhaustive federal investigation into recent reports that the VA is misdiagnosing PTSD as an “Adjustment Disorder” to save money.

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